

EQUITAN

Marie de France, translated Judith P. Shoaf ©1992

They were noble indeed, those barons,
Lords of Brittany, the Bretons!

The Bretons, for valor, in those days,
For courtliness,¹ and noble ways,
Took adventures they heard tell
Of such men as such things befell--
Then, to recall them, *lais* they'd make
Lest men forget, for memory's sake.
One such there is which I have heard
Of which one can't forget one word,
About Equitan who was so courtly,
Lord, judge, and king in Nantes country.

Equitan was much admired, and
Much beloved in his own land.
He loved sports and amorous sport--
That's why his was a knightly court.
Long life is not the recompense
For love without measure or sense;
But love itself is the measure of
Love; reason can't be kept in love.

Equitan had a seneschal,
A good knight, worthy, loyal,
Overseer of all his estate,
His manager and magistrate.
Except for war, no task, no thing--
No emergency--could draw the king
From his hunting and his pleasures,
And enjoying the river's leisures.

¹ The opening is particularly tricky. There is the broad irony of the emphasis on noble deeds and "courtesy" or "courtliness" at the beginning of a violent tale of adultery (finally called "*vilenie*," meaning "ignoble or peasant behavior," in line 294) punished. The name "Equitan" itself suggests two ideas that are frequently evoked in the poem: the Latin word for knights, *equites*, and the notions of equity and equality, justice and balance (including the social/sexual equality the lady wants in love). But Marie's irony is subtler as she slips imperceptibly from praise of the noble lords of Brittany to praise of those poets who, perhaps acting more morally than the barons they memorialized, turned the lords' "courtly" deeds into *lais*.

The seneschal had taken a bride
Who later brought evil to the countryside.
She was terribly beautiful,
Well-bred and respectable,
With a nice body, a good figure.
She was a masterwork of Nature:
Grey eyes in a lovely face,
Lovely mouth, nose in the right place.²
In the kingdom she had no peer.
Her praises reached the king's own ear.
Often he would send to greet her
Gifts he'd have his men bring her.
He desired her without seeing her.
Soon as he could, he got to meet her.
Hunting pleasure of a private sort,
He went into the country for sport.
In the manor of his seneschal,
The castle where the lady stayed,
The king took shelter at nightfall;
He needed rest, so hard he'd played.
Now he can talk to her, apart,
Reveal his worth, show her his heart.
He finds her courtly, wise, proper,
Beautiful in face and figure,
Friendly, too, lively, not cold.
Love enlists him in his household.
Love shot an arrow in his direction
And the wound it made's immense.
He hit his heart; this infection
Does not call for prudent sense.
This lady's love's assault is rude:
He becomes sad, thoughtful, subdued.
Now he puts himself on trial,
Offers no defense or denial:
That night he gets no sleep in bed,

²Notice the almost exact repetition of two lines describing a lady here (35-36) and in *Lanval* (565-66): "Grey eyes in a lovely [*Lanval*: white] face, / Lovely mouth, nose in the right place (bien assis)." All Marie's ladies conform to a single physical and moral ideal--pale grey-eyed golden-haired beauties with exquisite bodies and perfect manners and "breeding." But Equitan's lover's beauty and greed doom her lover and herself, while Lanval's fairy lover offers herself to him freely and saves him from death despite his misbehavior.

But blames and scolds himself instead.
 "Alas," he says, "what has fate tried,
 Leading me into this countryside?
 I saw this lady; now a dart
 Of agony has struck my heart.
 It makes my body shake and shiver.
 I think I really have to love her.
 If I love her, it's wrong, after all:
 She's the wife of my seneschal.
 I must keep faith with him lovingly,
 As I want him to do unto me.
 If by some trick he found out,
 I know it would bother him a lot.
 Still, wouldn't it be a pity
 If just for him I went crazy?
 The lady's so lovely, it'd be sad
 If she didn't love, if no lover she had!
 What good are all her courtly ways
 If she never learns love's plays?³
 Under heaven, any man, if she loved
 Him, would be terribly improved!
 If he does hear it somewhere or other,
 The sensechal shouldn't bother,
 For he can't have her to himself!
 Indeed, I want to share his wealth."
 He said this, and he sighed so deep,
 Then lay thinking, without sleep,
 Then spoke and said, "Now, just what
 Is troubling me? I'm so worried, but
 I haven't yet tried to discover
 If she'll take me for her lover.
 I will find out, right away!
 If she feels what I feel,
 My sorrow can begin to heal.
 God! It's so long yet until day!
 I won't get any rest this slow

³ The words "*druerie*, *dru*" (translated here as love's plays/amorous sport, and lover) are also used quite a bit in both *Lanval* and *Equitan*.. The word points to what has been called "courtly love"—a power relationship in which the man "serves" the lady; it can refer, for example, to the token a lady gives a knight to wear in a tournament. Both here and in *Lanval*, though, the love indicated by *druerie* is physical and private, not idealistic and public. In other poems (e.g., *Le Fresne* or *Yonec*), a love with a strong physical component is still a relationship between *ami* and *amie* (friends), not *druerie*

Night--I lay down so long ago."
He lay awake till it was light,
Longing for dawn in this sad plight.
He got up, he left for the hunt,
But soon, weary, back he went.
He didn't feel well, he said;
He went to his room and to bed.
The seneschal is chagrined;
He doesn't know what ill wind
Blows shivers and trembling on the king.
His wife is the reason for everything.
To amuse himself and to console
Him, he has her come chat in his room.
He opens up his heart and soul,
Tells her: for her he's near his doom;
She alone can grant him cheer,
Or decide his death is near.
"My lord," the lady tells the king,
"I need to think about this thing.
This first time, you understand,
I haven't thought it out or planned.
You are a king of the highest nobility;
I am not rich--well, little me,
You shouldn't think of me this way,
As a lover or partner in love-play.
If you did what you want with me,
I am sure as sure can be
Pretty soon you'd leave me there,
And I would be the worse for wear.
If it happens that I love you,
And what you ask for I give you,
Still it's not an equal share;
As lovers, we're an uneven pair.
Since you are a king of royal might,
And my husband owes you such respect,
You may be thinking, I expect,
To collect a love-tax as your right.
Love's worthless without equality.
Better a poor man's loyalty
If sense and worth are in that man;
And his love gives greater joy than
That of a king or prince, if he
Holds in his heart no loyalty.

If any one loves up higher
 Than one's wealth lets one aspire,
 Then one is afraid of everything.
 The rich man fears, for his part,
 Someone may steal his lady's heart,
 For he wants her just because he's king."
 Equitan's answer cannot wait:
 "Lady, please, please don't say it!
 These are not courtly men or women,
 No, it is a bourgeois bargain,
 If for wealth or feudal respect
 They work so hard towards a low object.
 Under heaven's no lady, wise and nice,
 Courtly--and how noble a heart, hers,
 Setting on love a good high price
 So she's not always changing partners--
 So poor, her cloak's her whole estate,
 But a rich prince in a castle royal
 Wouldn't suffer for her, and wait,
 And love her well, and be loyal.⁴
 Fickle lovers, who think they're slick,
 Always ready to play some trick,
 Are themselves deceived--they lose face.
 We've seen this in more than one case.
 If they lose out, it's not surprising;
 They earned it by their enterprising.
 Dear lady, I give myself to you!
 Don't think of me as your king; do
 Call me your friend and servitor!
 I swear to you, I tell you sure,
 That I will do whatever you say.

⁴ More than any other lai, I think, this one is full of complex, periodic double-negative and subjunctive constructions--that is to say, sentences that make very little sense until you've read them through twice. "Never, unless it were to make war, for no need that ever might arise, would the king leave off his hunting" (25-27) is a fairly simple example; "Under heaven there is no lady, if she is wise and good, courteous and noble of heart, because of which she would hold herself dear in love so that she might not be fickle, even if she should have nothing but her cloak, that a rich prince from a castle would not be obliged to toil for her..." (155-61) is a whopper. In the first case, one might suppose that Marie is trying to convey a complex, subtle situation. In the second, the king's supposedly sophisticated proposition is just a fairy-tale premise--Cinderella deserves a prince and will get him. The playful, complex syntax often hides a rude fact or obscures a simple truth: the king is irresponsible, adultery is wrong, murder is evil. The unthinkable becomes, in these twisted sentences, sayable. (On the other hand, readers of this translation may feel I didn't succeed in making them readable.)

Don't let me die for you today!
You're the lady, I'm the servant here;
Proud one, hear this beggar's prayer!"
The king talked on and on, and he
Begged her so to have mercy,
He convinced her his love was true,
So she gave him her body, too.
They pledged their troth, exchanging rings,
In faith forever--each other's kings.
They kept faith, as lovers and friends;
They died of it, and met their ends.

For a long time, their love endured,
And no-one ever heard a word.
When the times came for them to meet,
To talk together, the discreet
King would have the message spread
That he would be privately bled.
The bedroom doors were closed then.
You couldn't find such bold men
As, unless sent for by the king,
Would go inside for anything.
The seneschal sat as magistrate,
Judging cases, hearing debate.
So long the king loved this person
He'd no desire for another woman.
A bride, marriage--he didn't love it;
He never let anyone speak of it.
The populace thought this an evil;
Even the wife of the seneschal
Heard this, often; it weighed on her,
And she feared to lose her lover.
When she spoke alone with him
(She should make him glad to get her,
Embrace him, hug his neck, kiss him,
Play lovers' games together)
She wept and poured out tears instead.
The king wondered--what, he said,
Was the matter, why'd she cry?
Came the lady's sad reply:
"My Lord, it's for our love I mourn.
Love's turned to pain and I am torn.
You'll take a wife, a king's daughter,

And you'll leave me behind forever.
 I've heard the talk, I know it's true.
 And me, alas! what will I do?
 For you I ought to simply die--
 I know no other comfort, I!"
 The king spoke lovingly: "My dear,
 Lovely girl, you needn't fear!
 No indeed, I won't take a bride,
 Or leave you for another's side.
 Hear the truth, believe what I say:
 If your husband were out of the way,
 My wife, my queen is what you'd be--
 I wouldn't let anyone stop me!"
 The lady thanked him for what he'd said;
 She was very grateful indeed,
 And if he could promise, guaranteed,
 He wouldn't leave her to love or wed,
 She'd arrange, with the greatest speed,
 That her husband would be dead.
 This will be easy to accomplish
 With his help--and he will wish
 To help? He answers, yes, he will;
 There is nothing she could tell
 Him to do he wouldn't do, if he could--
 Madness or wisdom, folly or good.
 "Lord," she began, "If it seems best,
 Come hunting soon in the forest
 Where I live, in that land.
 In the castle of my husband
 Stay awhile; be bled there; say
 You'll have a bath on the third day.⁵
 My lord will have blood drawn, too,
 And take his bath along with you;
 Don't let him off--tell him that he
Must do it, keep you company!

⁵ The medical/social customs of letting blood and bathing are important in this lai, as in some other twelfth-century French romances. In the Tristan poems and in Chr tien de Troyes' *Knight of the Cart*, the adulterous hero leaks blood in the queen's bed, providing a clue to their sin and also a powerful emblem of sexuality; Marie herself uses the image of the bloody sheets in *Yonec*. Here, there's a shock in Equitan's switch from a life of hunting and fishing to the bedridden routine of a chronic patient of doctors who treat him by draining his blood; in neither phase was he much of an administrator, but clearly the populace prefers the knightly king to the invalid.

And I will have them warm the water,
And order the two tubs brought--
His bath will be boiling, hotter.
Under heaven no living man ought
To survive that scalding death
Before sitting down in that bath.
When he's dead, completely scalded,
Have your men and his recalled; bid
Them look at him, show them how
He died suddenly in his bath just now."
The king agreed to this all;
He would be at her beck and call.

Less than three months pass, and bring
To the country the huntsman king.
He has himself bled, feeling ill,
And with him his seneschal.
The king says he'll bathe, the third day;
The seneschal lets him have his way.
"You'll have your bath," he says, "with me."
The seneschal answers, "I agree."
The lady has them heat the water;
She has the two tubs brought her.
Beside the bed--plans haven't changed--
She has the two bathtubs arranged.
The boiling water's poured all
In the tub of the seneschal.
This good man is up and about;
To please himself, he'd just stepped out.
The lady comes to speak to the king;
He pulled her close as anything;
On her husband's bed they lay,
Enjoying every sport and play.
In that place they lay together
Just behind the tub of water.
The door was under watch and ward--
A girl was supposed to act as guard.
The seneschal came back in a hurry;
He knocked; the girl held the door fast;
Then he struck it in such a fury
His blows forced her to open at last.
He finds the king there in that place
Twined with his wife in close embrace.

The king looked up; he saw how he came.
To cover his vile, base, low shame,
Feet first into the tub he leapt.
And he was belly-naked,⁶ stripped;
Taking no heed except to hide,
Scalded, blanched, there he died.
His evil plan turned back on him;
Safe and sound stands his would-be victim.
The seneschal watched everything
That happened--tub, hot water, king.
He picked up his wife that minute
And plunged her headfirst down in it.
Thus they met their death, these two:
First the king, then the woman, too.
Anyone who wants to listen to reason
Can find here a moral for any season:
He who seeks to harm his neighbor
Will be the victim of his own labor.

It happened just as I have said now.
The Bretons made a lay to tell how
Equitan ended his noble life
And how much she loved him, that wife.

⁶ I borrowed the word "belly-naked" (297) from Chaucer's Merchant's account of the creation of Adam in the *Canterbury Tales*. *Equitan* and the *Merchant's Tale* share a sour view of the way men and women use high ideas and fancy talk to justify doing what they please; and both stories are deeply misogynistic, presenting beautiful women as ruthless man-traps, opportunistic deceivers. In both stories, original sin seems to be Adam's desire for "an help meet for him."